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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the findings of a study that examined the perceptions of 270 elementary school principals about a new Alabama certification model which abolishes categorical certification areas in special education and creates a generic "Collaborative Teacher" certification. Results indicate the most frequent special education delivery model continues to be the traditional resource room, with 69.9 percent of schools using this model. An inclusion model with collaboration and co-teaching is utilized in 28.5 percent of the schools. The mainstreaming approach, in conjunction with self-contained special education classes, is used in 43.3 percent of the schools, and 17.7 percent of the schools serve student with special needs in the regular classroom full-time. Seventy percent of respondents believe the new certification will lead to more special needs students being served in regular class settings. Finally, 82 percent of the participants believe they have not been provided with adequate information or training regarding the nature and use of teachers with this new certification. Almost all respondents stated that regular education teachers in their schools should receive inservice training on how to work effectively with teachers who have the Collaborative Teacher certification. The questionnaire used for the survey is attached. (CR)

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Principals' Perceptions of Alabama's Special Education Certification - Collaborative Teacher

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Abstract

Inclusive schools are a result of educational reform. The State of Alabama has abolished categorical certification areas in special education creating a generic certification - the Collaborative Teacher. This study examined the perceptions of elementary school principals concerning this new certification model. The results indicate the most frequent special education delivery model continues to be the traditional resource room. Seventy percent of respondents believe the new certification will lead to more special needs students being served in regular class settings. Finally, 82% of the participants believe they have not been provided adequate information or training regarding the nature and use of teachers with this new certification.

Principals' Perceptions of Alabama's Special Education Certification - Collaborative Teacher

Inclusive schools are a result of educational reform. These schools are often characterized by students with disabilities being served in regular classroom settings within their neighborhood schools, as opposed to separate special education classes. Although response to the "full inclusion" movement has been ambiguous (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1995), efforts to restructure regular education and special education continue. The state of Alabama has recently abolished categorical certification areas in special education and merged certification in emotionally conflicted, mental retardation, mild learning/behavior disabilities, multiple disabilities, orthopedically and other health impaired, and specific learning disabilities into the new Collaborative Teacher K-6 or 6-12 options. Dr. Bill East, Deputy Executive Director of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, stated that the Collaborative Teacher certification in special education is a national trend related to inclusive schools and the recently reauthorized IDEA (personal communication, August 8, 1998). This change is viewed as one major aspect of Alabama's response to the inclusion movement.

Without question, the school principal plays a crucial role in shaping the educational climate for an effective inclusive school (Gameros, 1994). However, previous research has found that a sizable number of principals (44.5%) in Alabama believe that their inclusion training is inadequate (Dyal, Flynt, & Bennett-Walker, 1996). In this same study, less than 5% of the principals who participated in a state-wide survey advocated full inclusion for their schools.

If the new collaborative teacher is going to make a positive contribution to an inclusive school, the principal will have to pave the way for their success. The purpose

of this study was to examine principals' perceptions of the efficacy of Alabama's new generic approach to certifying special education teachers. A better understanding of how school leaders view this aspect of the inclusion movement may prove helpful to concerned educational stakeholders.

Methodology and Procedure

Subjects in this study were 270 public elementary school principals randomly selected from the total population of elementary school principals in the state of Alabama. Data collection was accomplished by mailing a packet that included a cover letter, a copy of the questionnaire, and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope to 465 principals. This number represents 50% of the public elementary school principals in the state. A second mailing to subjects that did not initially respond took place after three weeks had elapsed. A total of 270 subjects responded for an overall response rate of 58%. Subjects' responses to the questionnaire pertaining to the Collaborative Teacher certification were compiled and analyzed.

Results

The demographic data provided by respondents included the following: gender; years of experience in school administration; types of special education certification held by school faculty; total number of students in their school; number of students served in special education in their school; and location of school (urban or rural).

There were 136 male and 134 female principals that participated in the survey. Years of administrative experience ranged from 1 to 39, with an average of 9 years for the entire group. Fifty-three percent of the respondents described their school setting as rural. The average number of regular education students in each school was 327.5, with an average of 22.5 students served in special education.

Principals' responses to the items in the questionnaire are provided in Table 1. This summary of the results shows that the most frequently used service delivery

model (69.6%) is the traditional resource room model. An inclusion model with collaboration and co-teaching is utilized in 28.5% of the schools. The mainstreaming approach, in conjunction with self-contained special education classes is used in 43.3% of the schools, and 17.7% of the schools serve students with special needs in the regular classroom full-time.

Approximately 70% of the respondents believe that the new Collaborative Teacher certification will lead to more students with special needs being served in regular class settings. A similar number state that this new certification will result in more joint planning time being scheduled between regular education and collaborative teachers. Roughly 63% of those surveyed anticipate changing the way special education services are offered when teachers with this new certification are employed. The respondents expressed uncertainty about the impact of the Collaborative Teacher certification on the shortage of special education teachers in the state. Forty-seven percent believe that the new Collaborative Teacher certification will reduce the shortage of special education teachers in the state, while 46% indicated that the new certification will not reduce this shortage.

Approximately 82% of the principals in the survey stated that they have not been provided adequate information or training regarding the nature and use of teachers with this new certification. Almost all (n = 256) stated that regular education teachers in their school should receive inservice training on how to work effectively with teachers that have the Collaborative Teacher certification.

Discussion

This study was conducted to gather data from elementary school principals throughout the state of Alabama concerning their views of the new Special Education Collaborative Teacher certification. The results of the survey clearly indicate two concerns. One, 8 out of 10 principals do not believe that they have adequate

information or training about the nature and use of teachers with this new special education certification. Second, almost 95% of the respondents believe that their faculty needs inservice training on how to work effectively with teachers that have the new Collaborative Teacher certification. These two findings should be informative for superintendents of school systems, State Department of Education personnel, and faculty in institutions of higher education. Local school administrators obviously believe that there is a need for more helpful information and training in order to effectively serve students with special needs. It is not sufficient to simply prepare new special education teachers under the guidelines of the Collaborative Teacher certification, there must also be concurrent professional development for the faculty and administration in schools throughout the state to make the inclusive school model work.

It is alarming to think that there are colleges and universities preparing future special educators to go out into settings where principals feel they are uninformed about how this teacher can best be utilized and their present faculty is not prepared to work effectively with them.

One gets a sense from some responses that principals expect this new certification to play an integral role in the move toward inclusive schools. Over 70% of survey respondents believe that this new certification will lead to more students with special needs being served in regular class settings and 63% expect some type of service delivery changes as well. However, there is undoubtedly a great deal of uncertainty about exactly how this will work in their school.

We seem to have the proverbial cart before the horse in this case, and that is particularly dangerous when the cart is heavily laden and the horse is galloping. The results of this study provide the impetus for all concerned parties with a vested interest

in education in the state of Alabama to advocate an immediate, large scale inservice effort to better prepare our schools to utilize collaborative teachers effectively.

References

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Fuchs, D., & Fuchs, L. S. (1994). Inclusive schools movement and the radicalization of special education reform. Exceptional Children, 20, 294-309.

Gameros, P. (1995). The visionary principal and inclusion of students with disabilities. NASSP Bulletin (Feb.), 15-17.

Table 1

Questionnaire Responses

N	%		
		1.	**How are special needs students served in your school?**
48	18	a.	in the regular classroom full-time.
188	70	b.	in the regular classroom for a portion of the day, while maintaining a continuum of special education placement options.
117	43	c.	mainstreaming children with mild disabilities, while maintaining separate, self-contained special education programs for children with moderate, severe and profound disabilities.
77	29	d.	serving children in an inclusive setting using collaborative/co-teaching practices.
		2.	**Will the new Collaborative Teacher certification lead to more students with special needs being served in regular class settings?**
192	71		Yes
66	24		No
		3.	**Will joint planning time between regular education and collaborative teachers be scheduled as a result of the new Collaborative Teacher certification?**
188	70		Yes
66	24		No
		4.	**Do you anticipate changing the way special education services will be provided when teachers have the new Collaborative Teacher Certification?**
171	63		Yes
84	31		No
		5.	**Have you been provided adequate information or training regarding the nature and use of teachers with the new Collaborative Teacher certification?**
46	17		Yes
221	82		No
		6.	**Should regular education teachers in your school receive inservice training on how to work effectively with teachers that have the new Collaborative Teacher certification?**
256	95		Yes
12	4		No
		7.	**Do you anticipate that the new Collaborative Teacher certification will reduce the shortage of special education teachers in the state?**
128	47		Yes
125	46		No

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